

ASF 2016 Study Materials & Activities for



A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare

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A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William
Shakespeare

Characters

at court:

Theseus, *Duke of Athens*

Hippolyta, *queen of the
Amazons*

Egeus, *a lord at court*

Hermia, *his daughter*

Lysander, *beloved of Hermia*

Demetrius, *the man Egeus
wants Hermia to marry*

Helena, *in love with Demetrius*

Philostrate, *a lord*

in the town:

Peter Quince, *a carpenter*

Nick Bottom, *a weaver who
plays Pyramus*

Francis Flute, *a bellows
mender who plays Thisbe*

Tom Snout, *a tinker who plays
Wall and Moon*

Snug, *a joiner who plays Lion*

in the forest:

Oberon, *king of the fairies*

Titania, *queen of the fairies*

Puck (Robin Goodfellow)

First Fairy, *who serves Titania*

Setting: Athens and a nearby
wood

Time: A fanciful, gypsy-filled
time in the past

*The cover image and other
illustrations in the study materials
are by the skilled Victorian
illustrator Arthur Rackham.*

Welcome to A Midsummer Night's Dream

Shakespeare's comedies are among the glories of drama, and none is more glorious than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a hearty confection of myth and magic, court and country, aristocrat and artisan. It dazzles with the delights of its fairy kingdom, its confused lovers, and its earnest amateur acting troupe—and any play that puts donkey ears on a blowhard is sure to please. It moves toward a spate of weddings and the funniest rendition of a tragedy known to theatre. Along the way, Shakespeare weaves four plots into a joyous comic pattern that divides and reunites, dreams and awakens, enchants and enlightens.

The Story

Trouble at Court

Having defeated Hippolyta in battle, Theseus now plans to wed this Queen of the Amazons. Egeus interrupts, complaining that his daughter Hermia will not marry Demetrius, the man Egeus has chosen. Hermia protests that she loves Lysander, but Duke Theseus must enforce Athenian law and decrees that Hermia must choose to wed Demetrius, go to a nunnery, or die.

Lysander convinces Hermia to elope with him to his aunt's house beyond Athenian law. They tell their plans only to Hermia's best friend, Helena, yet she tells Demetrius, who left her for Hermia, so she can follow him to pursue Hermia.

Meanwhile, some Athenian working men are planning to rehearse *Pyramus and Thisbe* secretly in the forest the next night.

Trouble in the Wood

In the forest, the king and queen of the fairies continue their quarrel about custody of a changeling boy. When Titania scorns Oberon, he swears revenge and decides to charm her into loving a wild animal, so he sends Puck for a magic flower.

When the rustics begin their forest rehearsal, Puck finds them and in jest puts a donkey's head on Bottom, the leading man, a transformation that scares away

*Titania
asleep
in her
bower,
and,
like the
lovers,
about to
awaken
to new
"love"*



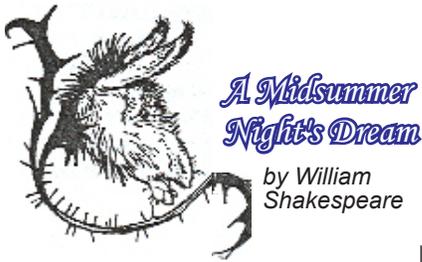
the others. Bottom's singing then awakens the flower-charmed Titania, and she falls in love with the ass.

Invisible Oberon hears Demetrius scorn Helena and sends Puck to charm Demetrius's eyes, but instead Puck finds Lysander and Hermia, so he anoints Lysander's eyes—and when that youth is awakened by Helena, he instantly falls in love with her. Oberon, miffed by the error, anoints Demetrius's eyes himself, so both young men now love Helena and scorn Hermia, who attacks her friend for stealing her beloved.

Awaking to Happiness

Once Oberon gets the changeling boy, he releases Titania from the charm and they reconcile. He also releases the charm on Lysander's eyes, so the young couples end up happily paired when they are discovered the next morning by Theseus and Hippolyta. Theseus overrules Egeus and allows Hermia to marry Lysander.

Pyramus and Thisbe is chosen to entertain the newlyweds, and it proves to be an unintentionally hilarious version of the tragedy, ending with a bergomask dance. Afterward, the newlywed couples say good night, and the fairies bless them.



Becoming an Ass

The ass is a long-eared, sure-footed, domesticated relative of the horse. In the ancient world, it was primarily a beast of burden, and one was reliable enough for Mary to ride to Bethlehem.

Even in Shakespeare's time, the term ass was also used to mean a fool or blockhead. Puck makes a judgment about Bottom—that he's a fool, an "ass"—and then as a joke gives him a literal ass's head.

Shakespeare was quite inventive with his ass jokes and repeated the term without the donkey head in *Much Ado about Nothing*, where the constable Dogberry is told he's an ass (accurately), and in his outrage he repeatedly insists that everyone remember "that I am an ass" so he can prosecute the miscreant.

The line counts listed are based on *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 3rd edition

Shakespeare and *Comedy*

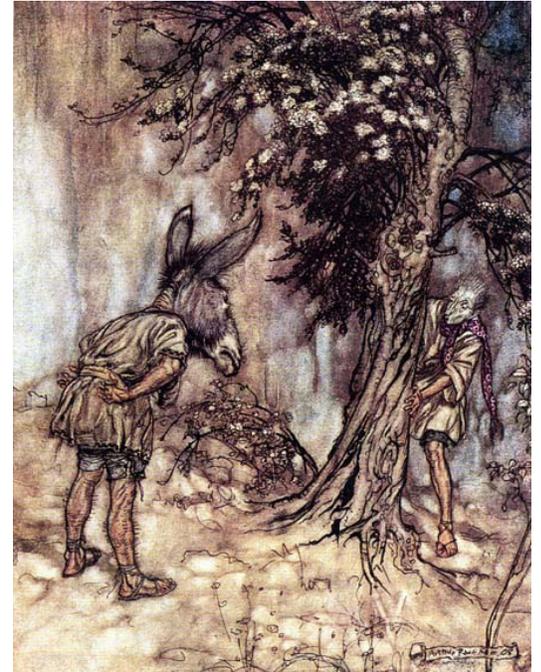
For Shakespeare, romantic comedy often opens with a serious and divisive event—a shipwreck, a forbidding injunction, or, as here, a death threat. Out of this severe challenge, he then weaves his comedy, for young lovers must be tested, parents must block children's desires, and authorities must for a time be unhelpful if true love is to prove itself and the knots untangled so the resolution can be welcome and joyous—and preferably full of weddings. "Lord, what fools these mortals be" might well describe the action in any of Shakespeare's comedies, but it is especially apt in *Midsummer*.

A Midsummer Night's Dream has a remarkably tight comic construction typical of Shakespeare's ability to juggle multiple sets of characters—here, four sets: the court, the lovers, the fairies, and the working men or mechanicals. Yet he tells the story in only nine scenes written mostly in verse. Exactly how typical is this play of Shakespeare's comic work? Let's look:

<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	11 scenes	1778 lines	87% verse/13% prose
<i>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>	20 scenes	2294 lines	82% verse/18% prose
<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	13 scenes	2649 lines	81% verse/19% prose
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	9 scenes	2174 lines	80% verse/20% prose
<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	9 scenes	2789 lines	61% verse/39% prose
<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	20 scenes	2660 lines	75% verse/25% prose
<i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>	16 scenes	2862 lines	25% verse/75% prose
<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	23 scenes	3018 lines	10% verse/90% prose
<i>As You Like It</i>	22 scenes	2857 lines	41% verse/59% prose
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	18 scenes	2690 lines	35% verse/65% prose

Midsummer is a shorter comedy, mostly in verse, and with comparatively few scenes. Shakespeare accomplishes all the comic confusion and conflict in *Midsummer* because he gets all four sets of characters into the forest where they can intersect each other's scenes. And the percentage of verse is not surprising, for the play comes from what scholars call Shakespeare's lyrical period, about 1594 to 1596, when he had just finished his sonnets and narrative poems and was writing this play as well as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard II*, a play entirely in verse.

As he continued to work with comedy, we can see that Shakespeare began to write more heavily plotted story lines and



Arthur Rackham's newly transformed Bottom and a mystified Peter Quince

told them more in prose—a medium at which he was equally adept.

Until the last scene of *Midsummer*, only the working men speak prose, but once their play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* begins, a reversal occurs—the courtiers speak prose in their comments about the play while the players, the working men, speak verse in enacting it. Only after the bergomask that officially ends that presentation does Theseus return to verse. Thus, the presence of the play-within-a-play enacts its own kind of transformation on everyone concerned, giving them time in each other's verbal world, transmuting the workers for a moment into the expressive mode of literary heroes and romantic lovers.



A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William
Shakespeare



Magic fills the fairy kingdom, but it can wreak havoc for mortals, revealing its nightmarish aspects, as when Puck torments Lysander when the youths decide to fight (Rackham)

Arthur Rackham (1867-1939) was a famous English book illustrator. His distinctive work was often seen in books of fantasy or legend, such as this play or *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Niebelungen*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, and many others.

Making *Magic*: Midsummer + Night + Dream

Midsummer

In many agrarian cultures, times of planting, ripening, and harvest were marked by folk celebrations when the annual cycle of fertility was acknowledged with holiday indulgence. The "rites of May" that Theseus in 4.1 ironically suggests the sleeping lovers have been keeping were one such time, associated with planting; midsummer or the summer solstice was another. Midsummer is the apogee, the limit of the year's bloom and burgeoning, after which the focus turns to ripening and harvest. Festivals associated with fertility often involved not only eating and drinking but a celebration of human fertility as well.

Night

Much of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does, in fact, occur at night. Arguably the first scene is at night, since they discuss the current phase of the moon. Certainly the entire action in the forest is during the night and early dawn, and the wedding feast and after-dinner entertainment are again at night, waiting for bedtime. Likewise, the working men can only rehearse their play at night, on their own time. Darkness and being in nature rather than the city both play into the power of the forest scenes, for the supernaturals are at home in the night and the forest, but the young lovers and amateur actors miss their urban context.

Night also takes on a psychological power in the play; darkness reveals hidden urges, strange apprehensions, and changes, not to mention how often a bush is supposed a bear. Nothing is clear to the mortals at night, for they are tired and in a strange place in the dark.

Dream

If night is psychologically destabilizing, dreams are even more psychologically revealing. The disorientation, absurdity, exquisite pleasure, terror, and confusion of the dream state well defines the mortals' experience through the middle of the action. Bottom the weaver finds himself in the arms of the fairy queen—he has never had a dream like this before! Bottom, the most fortunate mortal in the play, enters the fairy kingdom and is embraced by it.

For the lovers, however, the nighttime forest experience is a nightmare in which love becomes a torment of denial, mockery, or betrayal. Titania's experience is likewise part dream and part nightmare (especially if donkey braying is not her favorite sound). Love may be a dream, but dreams are quickly-changing psychic flickers, and the truths they tell us may not always be what we expect.





A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare

Charting the Plot Lines

Midsummer is the ideal play for a plot chart—four columns: Athenian royalty, fairy royalty, young lovers, and mechanicals [with *Pyramus and Thisbe*].

Parallels and cognate shifts will quickly become apparent, as will the round-robin of relationships among the young lovers—Helena is odd-one-out, then a few squeezes of flower juice later and Hermia is the odd-one-out, perhaps for the first time in her life.

Charting the plot changes also lets students see how well Shakespeare juggles the action with an eye to maximizing crisis, and as it nears the breaking point, he deftly solves the problems and restores love and peace.



The lovers awaking to renewed love (Rackham)

Themes and Issues in A Midsummer Night's Dream/ 1

The conflicts of the play are shaped early and echoed from urban setting to forest groves. The fairy turmoil reveals how important peace and harmony are, why the marriage rather than the war between Theseus and Hippolyta is to be desired. The fairies also raise issues of childrearing, a topic on which Egeus and the law of Athens have strong views. The natural and the supernatural mirror issues throughout the play.

WARFARE

Theseus vs. Hippolyta echoed in forest by Oberon vs. Titania

Court—warfare just completed

- war between state of Athens and Amazons just resolved
- individual combat between leaders in which Theseus defeated Hippolyta
- goal: union via marriage (ceremony, feast); hunting together entertainment)
- means: may be linked to how Theseus resolves Hermia's plight

RUNAWAY LOVERS

Hermia/Lysander vs. Egeus/Demetrius echoed by *Pyramus and Thisbe*

Lovers at Court

- paternalistic values: father can choose husband for daughter, forbid her love
- forces involved: legal threat (law backs father's choice at peril of daughter's life); Theseus adds nunnery option
- goal: Hermia marries Demetrius
- means: taking case before Duke



Confrontation of Oberon and Titania (Rackham)

Forest—"warfare" ongoing

- open quarrel between king and queen of fairies over changeling boy
- side effects of individual conflict: seasons disrupted, storms and floods, crops rot
- goal: mutual harmony (dance, blessing of mortals' ceremony)
- means/forces involved: magic (force fields, magic flowers, spells) and trickery involving misdirected love

Lovers in the Forest

- individual values: lovers choose for themselves
- forces involved: although the lovers little suspect it, Oberon's magic and Puck's errant delivery determine their affections
- immediate goal: love will triumph—Hermia escapes with Lysander; Helena spends time with Demetrius
- long-term goal: couples happily wedded
- means: elopement; Helena telling Demetrius of these plans; Oberon's magic flower and Theseus's decision

Pyramus and Thisbe

- paternalistic values forbid their love
- lovers sneak out to meet
- they act on fears: Thisbe flees lion; Pyramus fears she is dead, kills self; she finds him dead and kills herself



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Themes and Issues/ 2—*Enchantment: Eyes and Love*

In this play, the male forces define not only the “conquests” (that is, the men win) but also the nature of the love portrayed. Men’s love through the ages has been visually stimulated (consider everything from the physical obsession with female beauty and youth to the existence of strip clubs or *Playboy* magazine).

- Shakespeare usually provides a central image for the nature of love, and in this play it is visual, centered on the eyes and magic.
- Hippolyta initially sees Theseus more as an enemy than as a lover/husband; the war has not yet become peace, the enemies have not become spouses.
- Egeus sees Demetrius as the worthier mate for Hermia; Hermia sees Lysander as the worthier mate—they “see things” differently.
- Demetrius is sick in love with Hermia; jilted Helena is sick in

love with Demetrius and, since she is thought as fair as Hermia, tries to reason how love “looks”—with the eyes or with the mind—and why Demetrius seems so “blind” to her beauty.

- Oberon and Titania accuse each other of infidelity with a variety of mortals.
- Oberon cannot persuade Titania to give him the changeling boy by request or command, so he decides to have his will by a different kind of force—he will distract her with a new love by means of a magic flower which, when administered to the eyes, causes a person to love the next thing s/he sees. Thus Titania awakes to love a transformed Bottom.
- Puck is told to use the magic juice on Demetrius, but gives it to Lysander by mistake; Oberon then anoints Demetrius’s eyes, so both men who loved Hermia now love Helena.



Titania doting on Bottom: "I will wind thee in my arms"

Enchantment, Eyes, & Love in the Text

- The first scene quickly inundates us with eye imagery. Egeus tells Theseus that Lysander “hath bewitch’d the bosom of my child,” using gifts and songs and cunning to “filch” her heart and obedience (1.1.26-38)

Hermia responds, “I would my father look’d but with my eyes,” but the Duke instructs, “Rather your eyes must with his judgment look” (1.1.56-57).

Likewise, Lysander accuses Demetrius of using the same devices on Helena, so she now “dotes, / Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry” on Demetrius (1.1.106-10).

Helena considers Hermia’s eyes to be “lodestars,” but Hermia consoles her that Demetrius will not see her anymore since she and Lysander are going to “turn away our eyes” from Athens. Helena mourns that Demetrius dotes on Hermia’s eyes and that she also dotes on his.

Because this sight seems errant, she decides that “Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, / And therefore is wing’d Cupid painted blind.” Then she decides to tell Demetrius of her friend’s plan in order to “have his sight thither and back again” (1.1.226-51).

The lovers’ dialogue abounds with eyes.

The minute Demetrius, charmed with the flower juice, awakes to see Helena, he focuses on her eyes: “O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine! / To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?” (3.2.137-8, old plural form, like “oxen”).

- The flower hit by Cupid’s shaft, love-in-idleness (the pansy), has the ability to enchant, for “The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid / Will make or man or woman madly dote/ Upon the next live creature that it sees” (2.1.155-72). Oberon’s invisibility is yet another effect on eyes.



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Themes and Issues/ 3: *Transformation*

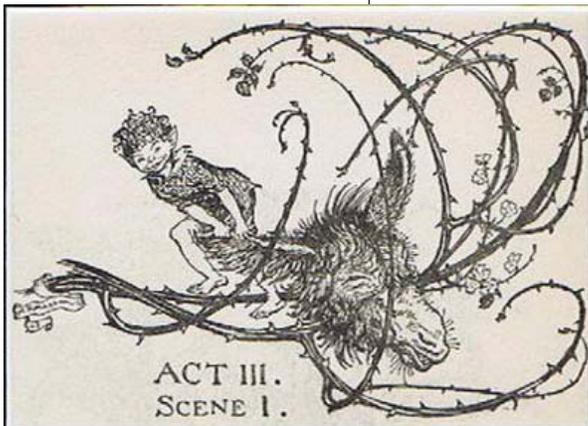
The magic flower's juice instantly changes its victim's emotional attachments, obsessing that person with what is next seen. For the young lovers, the juice plays with the fickleness of love. Yet the central focus of transformation is Bottom the weaver.



- Bottom physically changes when given an ass's head, but does not seem to change much emotionally. He is surprised by Titania's love, but still Bottom.
- Titania loves Bottom obsessively, perhaps as she did the changeling boy. When Oberon lifts the spell, the experience seems like a dream, and she loathes the sight of ass-headed Bottom.

Transformation in the Text

- Repeatedly, the point is made that someone has changed. In terms of the lovers, Egeus says Hermia is "bewitch'd," and Helena is distraught that Demetrius now loves Hermia instead of her. Once the charmed flower works on the men, Helena keeps asking them why they have changed their love to her, and Hermia likewise asks Lysander why he has changed. They assume that love is true and lasting, and to find it altered shatters



their trust—a hard lesson that everyone in love may learn at some time.

Love transforms everyone in the play, as it usually does in romantic comedy. Here, however, transformation takes on a literal aspect, for with the presence of magic and enchantment, people and spirits can physically transform.

- Like Titania, Lysander and Demetrius change not physically but emotionally. They instantly express themselves as alpha-males—they want to fight for the girl. In their own way, they too have joined the animal kingdom.
- The young women also change, but not by means of any magic potion. As the young men's affections change, the women act in ways we have not previously seen—Helena betrays her childhood friend and gets in a few catty comments, and Hermia turns into a shrew when she thinks Helena has stolen her boyfriend. When love returns, so does inner peace.

- Puck describes himself as a great shape-shifter, a practical joker or "knavish sprite" who pretends to be a stool or a roasted crabapple only to cause upset. He does not change his own shape during the play but clearly displays his powers when he gives Bottom a donkey head as a joke. The nature of the change is echoed in everyone else's response to seeing the altered Bottom: "O Bottom, thou art chang'd," "Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated" (3.1.109-114). Bottom's replies echo the pun of his change, from figurative ass to literal ass: "What do you see? You see an ass-head of your own, do you?... This is to make an ass of me...." Yet this lucky ass gets the charmed love of Titania.
- When Titania and Bottom are each released from the flower's charm, they speak of the effect as a "vision," linking the themes of eyes and transformation. Titania says, "My Oberon! What visions have I seen! / Methought I was enamor'd of an ass" (4.1.75-6), then is shown the truth of her vision. Bottom, however, awakens alone to savor that "I have had a most rare vision" (4.1.203).



A Midsummer Night's Dream

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*A lesson in roaring—in art
and life—to bring a "lion" before
ladies (Rackham)*



*Bottom and the Fairy Queen
(Rackham)*

Themes and Issues/ 4: Reality and *Imagination*

Shakespeare always tries to engage and challenge his audience's imagination. In the opening of *Henry V*, the Chorus admits that the acting company cannot do justice to the Battle of Agincourt, so the audience must do the work: "On your imaginary forces work. Suppose...." And that supposing is the essence of the dramatic art, the willing suspension of disbelief by which the audience enters the action and for a time exists in its "reality."

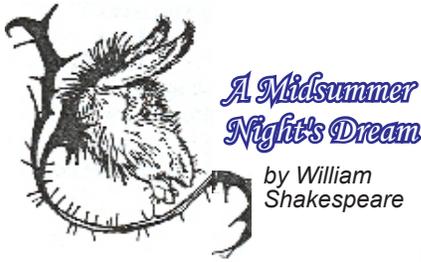
In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare also asks questions about what can and cannot be shown on stage, but these questions come from the earnest endeavors of the amateur actors. For them, there is very little difference between art and life; it is all real. So when Snug is given the role of the Lion and Bottom wants to play it, too, Quince advises him that, even in an age before special effects, "An' if you should do it too terribly, you would fright the Duchess and the ladies, that they would shriek..." (1.2.68-70).

The issue of theatrical realism becomes more intense once the men meet to rehearse, for they have questions about how to achieve certain technical effects and how to let the audience know the action is not "real," that is, that no one actually dies. They decide they will use a prologue as disclaimer to assure the audience of

everyone's safe survival and that there is no wild beast loose in their midst. The comedy lies in the fact that they believe we would need such assurance, that we would share their absolute faith in their own skills. Then they worry about the need for moonshine and a wall. Although the moon will shine the night of their play, they decide to have someone "to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine" (2.1.56-57). Likewise, someone must play the role of Wall, with all the necessary accoutrements of plaster and roughcast.

Wall and Moonshine provide much laughter for the onstage as well as the offstage audience of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Yet the action of that play takes us beyond levity to the actual magic of theatre, for Pyramus and Thisbe grieve each other's death, and if played earnestly, we can go in a moment from laughing at the amateur antics of these clowns to a heartfelt sympathy for the loss of the characters they portray. Shakespeare knows exactly what he is doing here, letting us in on the joke and then turning it serious. It is the same faith in the power of theatre that lets him sport with boys playing girls that are sometimes disguised as boys, calling our attention to the convention and then charming us into forgetting it. Such magic happens here as young Flute becomes young Thisbe, and however bad the costume and wig, we may actually mourn along with "her."

Showing us the magic does not dispel it, and in this play Shakespeare himself allows our imaginary forces to work overtime. He includes fairies in the cast—real fairies? Well, as real as anyone else. All actors are enchanted into the portrayal of their roles, and we get to imagine various realms of existence and to celebrate both Oberon's magic and Shakespeare's dramatic magic in the course of the action.



Three Styles of *Verse* in *Midsummer*

IAMBIC PENTAMETER

Blank Verse and Couplets

There is less blank verse in this play than in other Shakespeare plays because much of it is written in heroic couplets. Many critics feel this verse style is a spillover from his narrative poems and sonnets written during the plague years of 1592-93 when the theatres were closed by law.

One of the first things an actor does in studying a verse text is notice when the lines are in verse and when in prose—and what information might be gleaned from that choice. In this play, characters will switch from blank verse to couplets, so the same question can be asked—why?

BALLAD METER

Parts of *Pyramus and Thisbe* sound very different from the usual iambic pentameter scenes—and they should. In order to give the play an "old" aural texture, Shakespeare switches to a parody of medieval and early 16th-century plays written in ballad meter. In fact, Renaissance English plays only settled on iambic pentameter as their form fairly late in the 16th century.

Ballad meter is also called "fourteeners" because the medieval ballad was made up of fourteen-syllable couplets. Over time, the fourteen syllables seemed too long for a line of English poetry, so the ballad couplet was broken down into what is now the ballad quatrain: 8, 6, 8, 6 rhyming xaxa, thus preserving the vestige of the old couplet form.

Listen to Bottom's rendition of Pyramus's lines, find the rhyme, and also note the heavy alliteration that was a decorative element in medieval verse.

FAIRY METER

Fairies do speak blank verse, but at times fairies also have their own distinctive, quicker seven-syllable trochaic verse form which Shakespeare uses for anyone supernatural. At the end of the play Puck rhymes in quatrains (abab) before doing the Epilogue in couplets.

Examples

The play opens in blank verse:

Theseus:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace; four happy days bring in
Another moon, but, oh, methinks, how slow
This old moon wanes! she lingers my
desires....

As Helena enters, so do the heroic couplets—

Hermia:

God speed fair Helena! Whither **away**?

Helena:

Call you me fair? that fair again **unsay**.
Demetrius loves your fair. O happy **fair**!
Your eyes are lode-stars; and your tongue's
sweet **air**....

* * * *

Watch Pyramus switch from iambic pentameter to ballad meter (printed in texts as shorter lines to emphasize the internal rhyme:

Sweet moon, I thank thee for thy sunny
beams.

I thank thee, moon, for shining now so bright!
For, by thy gracious, golden, glittering
gleams,

I trust to taste of truest Thisbe's sight.

But stay—O spite!	} 14 syllables
But mark—poor knight, What dreadful dole is here ?	
Eyes, do you see?	} 14 syllables
How can it be? O dainty duck! O dear !	

The same, typed as "fourteener" ballad lines:

But stay—O spite! But mark—poor knight, what
dreadful dole is **here**?
Eyes, do you see? How can it be? O dainty duck!
O **dear**!

* * * *

The shorter "fairy speech" verse:

Titania:

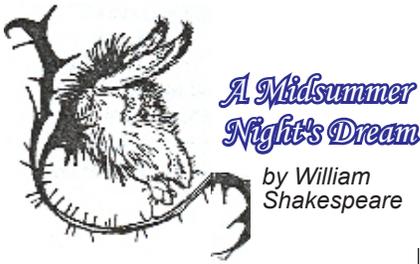
Come, my lord; and in our flight,
Tell me how it came this night,
That I sleeping here was found,
With these mortals on the ground.



"Hand in hand, with fairy grace,
Will we sing and bless this
place."

Recognizing Ballad Meter

Emily Dickinson, among others, often uses this stanza form. Look at her poems and find her ballad "roots."



Faerie shrink art Tolkien to Tinkerbell—Tolkien's elves are from the medieval tradition, taller than human. Rackham's are Victorian and tiny (see right), as is Barrie's Tinkerbell. Below, Rackham's tiny fairy dancing on a spider web.



The Origin and Evolution of Fairies

Shakespeare roots his magical comedy in the legendary world of Athens with the like of Theseus and Hippolyta, heroes both. Their wedding plans bookend the action of the play, but in between Shakespeare taps other traditions that stem from that world, the tutelary spirits of wood and dale, fertility and harvest that descended from the folk memory of ancient gods and goddesses.

When new belief systems enter, the old may be supplanted but not eradicated; instead they change and find another role in the lives of believers. Diana may no longer be worshipped as goddess of the moon, the hunt, and virginity, but she may figure in the fairy world as its queen, Titania (one of the names given Diana in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), or as another forceful figure, Mab, both inventively celebrated in Shakespeare's plays around 1595.

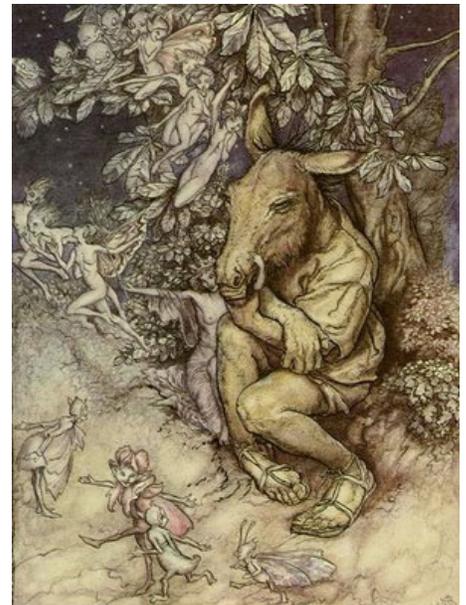
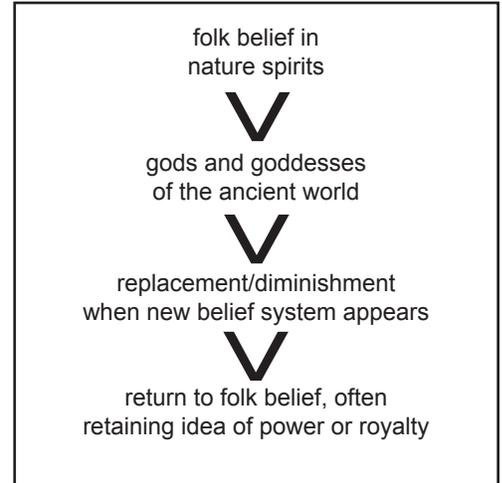
Folk belief was also linked supernaturals to the natural world's four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Many spirits were seen in terms of their "elemental" nature, and the arguments of fairy royalty in the play affect both the seasons and the weather.

"Honey, I Shrunk the Fairies!"

Folk belief in many countries involves some sense of "the little people," be they fairies, elves, hobgoblins, or leprechauns. Yet the medieval view of faerie, especially the romance tradition of King Arthur tales, portrayed the fairies as tall, elegant creatures, beyond mortal size and power. J.R.R. Tolkien's elves bring this medieval faerie world into modern fantasy.

Even in the Renaissance, fairies were not considered fantastical but real creatures of very nearly human size. They appear as an entire kingdom of sometimes dangerous beings who might steal a human child or disfigure it, not to mention pinching anyone whose behavior they disliked. They dance in a circle, sing, ride, and are always beautiful nocturnal creatures of great power.

Many historians of folklore point to Shakespeare as the source of fairy diminution. In both *Romeo and Juliet*



and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairy world becomes playfully small and picturesque: Mercutio gives a dazzling description of Queen Mab's miniscule coach and its accoutrements, a fantasy creation of hazelnut shells, spider legs, and grasshopper wings. Titania's fairies sport and serve amid the flowers, delivering dew drops, and their very names, Mustardseed and Moth, suggest tininess. The fairy kingdom never recovered from Shakespeare's playful alteration of its size and nature into benign toys, a shift that became a permanent fashion after 1625.



A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William
Shakespeare



Arthur Rackham's Puck

Robin Goodfellow: A *Spirit* of Another Sort

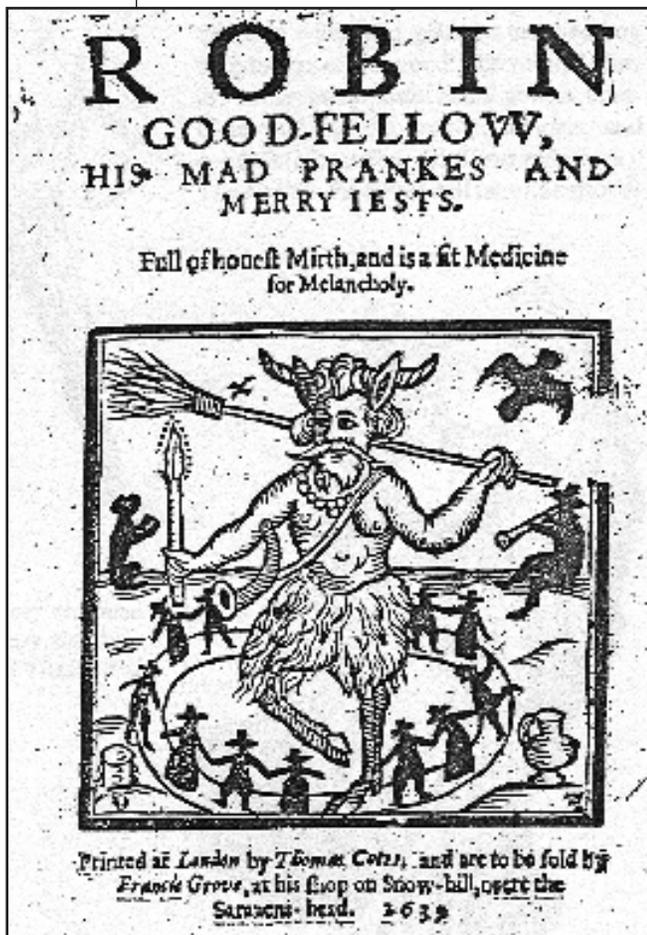
In creating his world of supernaturals and woodland sprites, Shakespeare combined the traditional fairy realm with the folk tradition of England. No figure represented that spirit of English folklore better than Robin Goodfellow.

Robin emerges from the Middle Ages as a wandering spirit who can take up residence in farms or rural villages. The first written mention of Robin (1489) is as a prankster. He was not part of the fairy kingdom, not devil nor *pouk* (puck) nor hobgoblin, as Shakespeare seems to suggest. Instead, he was "the national practical joker," one who loved jests and pranks and who was

famous for his resounding laugh, "ho, ho, ho!" any time he pulled off a good joke. In a court masque, Ben Jonson described Robin as "the honest, plain country spirit, and harmless; Robin Goodfellow, he that sweeps the hearth and the house clean, riddles for the country maids, and does all their other drudgery" (*Love Restored*).

"Goodfellow" is not a family name or species, but instead a propitiary title: by calling him a "good fellow," one hoped he would prove so. He was a large, lumbering figure, very hairy, sometimes mistaken for a bear, and he loved a bowl of cream and white bread. Outdoors he was more mischievous than indoors. He enjoyed farmhouses and village servants, especially hardworking ones, but never entered castles or dealt with aristocrats. He could transform his shape, as he joyfully describes to First Fairy in *Midsummer*, and when he wore clothes they were rustic togs. He was rarely found without his broom, for he often swept and did other chores very noisily. A matchmaker by instinct, he would meddle in any cause of true love.

By nature Robin Goodfellow was a loner, and it was Shakespeare who nicknamed him "Puck," who put him in the fairy band as Oberon's jester, and who cost him his rural respect. No longer did Robin cavort at will; he had to obey. And if he wasn't obeying Oberon, he was sometimes portrayed in later plays as taking orders from a devil (as in Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*). It is a sobering lesson: fame has its price, and being put in a play by Shakespeare can cost a jolly sprite his independence.



A rendition of the
English folk spirit
Robin Goodfellow

Robin/Puck and Fairies

- Critics have observed that there is a difference between "Puck" (a "pouk" or trickster spirit) and "Robin" (the helper). Is this true in the play as you experienced it? Where do we see each aspect of the character? Where is each name used?
- Shakespeare's fairies mix classical, medieval, folk, Celtic and English traditions. Research their provenance.



Some Productions Available on Video

- 1935 black and white film** with Mickey Rooney as Puck, James Cagney as Bottom, balletic fairies.
- 1969 Royal Shakespeare Company film** directed by Peter Hall in '60s modern dress (mini skirts and gogo boots with only strategic leaves for the au naturel fairies), starring Judi Dench as Titania and Diana Rigg and Helen Mirren as girls.
- 1981 BBC made for television version** with Helen Mirren as Titania, children as Renaissance fairies. Not paced quickly.
- 1996 English televised version based on an RSC stage production**, with doubled roles (including mechanicals as some of the fairies), a forest of light bulbs, and a frame story of a child dreaming the action, which was not part of the original stage version.
- 1999 film by Michael Hoffman** with Kevin Kline as Bottom the dreamer, Michelle Pfeiffer as Titania, Calista Flockhart and Rupert Everett. The fairies are saturnalian and the action is busy rather than funny.

Traditions from the Play's Production History

The tradition for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is rich and detailed; here are some elements from the play's production history.

Doubling

During the 19th century, all the fairies, Oberon included, were played by women, and they were in ballet costume with wings. But 20th-century productions faced a crucial problem, not with the fairies so much as with Theseus and Hippolyta. One needed strong actors in these high-profile roles, but they only appear at the very beginning and very end of the play. How can one justify paying famous actors for such small roles? Often, therefore, these roles were doubled with the roles of Oberon and Titania, so that the fairies' argument seems to reflect and also to be a working out of the tensions between the court's leaders. For instance, this device can be seen in the 1996 English film of the Royal Shakespeare Company's production, and it is a notable stage device.

Lights

That 1996 RSC film also exhibits another frequently explored production aspect, playing with lights. It used hanging yellow light bulbs as the forest, a kind of

magic enlightenment, and added a huge umbrella for Titania's bower in honor of the bad weather prompted by the fairy royalty's spat.

Costumes: pajamas and underwear

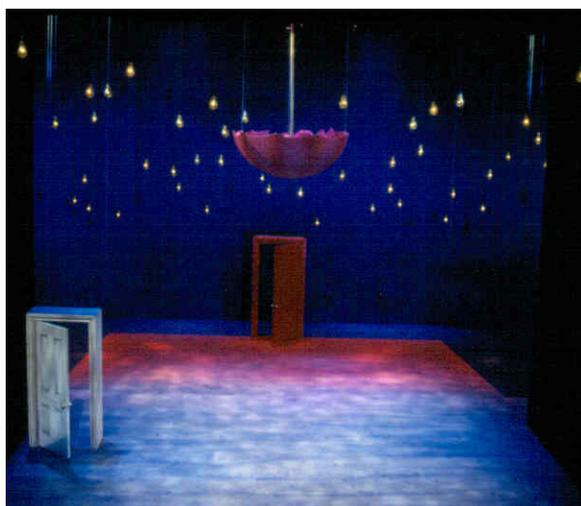
Because the title of the comedy focuses on night, one frequently-explored modern costume element is pajamas. It is a way of emphasizing the dream quality and the vulnerability of the lovers and other characters.

Another costume choice that modern directors often make is to have the lovers slowly disrobe during their night in the forest, as if running through briars (a threat Puck uses on the mechanicals) is part of the experience. They sometimes end up in period underwear, in slips, longjohns, or whatever, as if they are stripped to their basic psyches, to their basic desires, and for a moment to their basic clothing (though to nothing so skimpy as most contemporary bathing suits).

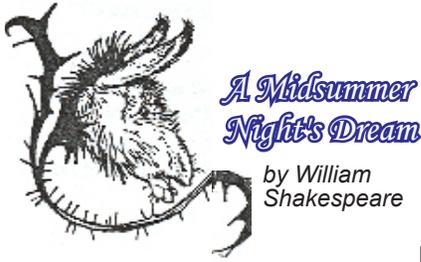
Music and Sound

Nineteenth-century composers provided scores to accompany the spectacular performances of Shakespeare's plays. The most famous of these is Felix Mendelssohn's beautiful incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which has graced numberless productions since 1843. Not only does it provide violin fairies and a braying horn donkey, but its "Wedding March" now follows "You may kiss the bride" at most weddings.

During the Restoration and 18th century, however, the play was barely Shakespeare, for the words were supplanted by music—dozens of songs replaced Bottom and the mechanicals, who did not reappear in England until 1840. Balletic fairies were the craze, a tradition that lasted until 1970, when Peter Brook's white-box-and-trapezes production exploded the play into a new world of possibilities.



The Royal Shakespeare Company open staging for the forest in its Midsummer, the basis for the 1996 film—light bulbs and umbrella—though the film uses many more settings as it adapts the original concept.



Dicotemies to Consider:

- everyday/holiday
- town/wood
- day/night
- waking/dreaming
- comedy/tragedy
(How does *Pyramus and Thisbe* compare to the play itself?)

Other Basic Critical Issues

- A common critical remark is that the lovers are indistinguishable, just types. Is that true from the text and the production?
Compare the challenges of every courting or married couple in the play, including those in the play-within-a-play
- We may laugh at the working class characters and their earnest concerns, but when they are the focus center stage, how do the aristocrats behave? Are they respectful? a "good" audience?

Considering Some *Critical* Views of the Play

- C. L. Barber in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedies* sees these plays as Elizabethan celebrations, "license within certain boundaries," and a spirit of carnival—a letting go of inhibitions, masquerade, acting out desires. The Lord of Misrule was a traditional figure leading the fun and subverting authority via the pleasure principle. Barber sees the pattern as from release to clarification, especially freedom from the restriction of ordinary social roles. They mock social conventions but by the end re-join them.
- Both Barber and Northrup Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* discuss "the green world" at the center of many Shakespeare comedies. Frye links this green world to the dream world of our desires.

Assessing These Ideas in the Play

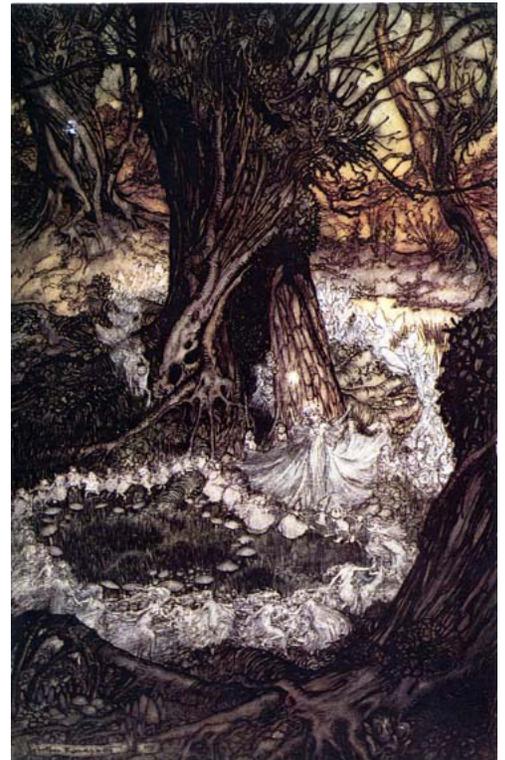
- What kind of "license" do Shakespeare and his characters explore? Is there a "carnival" spirit, a lack of inhibition?
- Is there a Lord of Misrule? Anyone who subverts authority or enjoys fun more than order? What is the effect on the play?
- Does "release" lead to "clarification" in the play? Are social roles "restricting" early in the play? How, why? How much "release" is there in the wood?
- What is the nature of the "green world" in this play? Is its "greenness" just nature or is there more to it?
- Do the character act out a dream world of their desires in the wood? How "dreamy" is that?
- Is the play's ending "proper" and "desirable"? How, why?

The Elizabethan Context of the Play

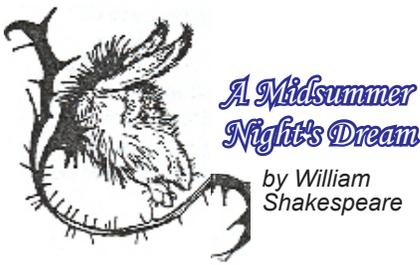
A long-standing theory about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that Shakespeare may have written it with a specific aristocratic wedding in mind, a wedding for which the Lord Chamberlain's Men provided entertainment. Every major English wedding between 1590 and 1600 has been scrutinized and considered, and a few have large followings among critics, but no single wedding has won total assent.

The play does establish a wedding as its objective from the very beginning and ends with more weddings than anticipated—plus a play about defiant love ending tragically. With onstage nobles watching a play on stage, having more nobles as an audience watching those noble characters is just the kind of meta-theatrical effect Shakespeare relishes. He loves to wink about theatre action even while involving us in it.

Another edge to this theory is that Queen Elizabeth seems to have been in attendance, as several allusions to her and events honoring her are mentioned in the play.



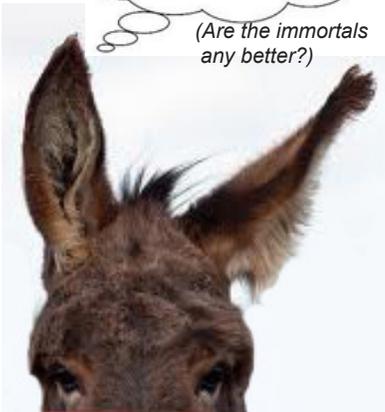
A roundel and a fairy song



Rackham visualizing the stormy effect of Oberon and Titania's relationship on nature

Lord, what fools
these mortals be!

(Are the immortals
any better?)



Pre-Show *Discussion* Topics

These topics do not assume a knowledge of the play; they deal with issues and situations that the play treats. After seeing the play, follow up by assessing the play's treatment of these topics.

The Genre of Comedy

Ask the students to consider comedies they know (from film, television, or class) in terms of these traits and then to watch for these elements in Shakespeare's play:

- Comedy focuses on the group, rather than on the tragic individual
- Begins by dividing group(s)
- Works toward maximum dysfunction and then solves the dilemmas (in farce, the climax is a chase scene)
- Ends by restoring or reuniting group
- In romantic comedy a blocking parent interferes with young love, and lovers and servants must scheme to triumph. The traditional endings are weddings, dances, and/or feasts.

The Classical Definition of Comedy

- Where Aristotle says tragedy depends on the raising and purgation of pity and fear, comedy works with sympathy and ridicule
- Aristotle says that in comedy the characters are "like us or worse" in actions and morals

The Way Love Works

Discuss or sketch in writing:

- how love begins and what film or poem gets it right
- how we assess love at first sight (the real thing? all chemical/physical?)
- how important the aspect of sight/appearance is in prompting love
- what happens when love changes
- how you deal with former boy- or girlfriends
- what happens when you're dumped by someone you love
- how you "get back together"?

The World of Faerie

How many students read fantasy or have seen fantasy films? What is fantasy's appeal and value? How does it work? What do different kinds of characters, such as Tolkien's hobbits, wizards, Numenorians, elves, and dwarves provide in terms of our understanding ourselves?

Now—do we believe in fairies? Tolkien calls the idea of enchantment or the world of fantasy the realm of Faerie. This is the world we enter along with the other mortals when we enter Shakespeare's wood outside Athens. What does the presence of supernatural creatures offer or portend for mortals?

Post-Show *Textual* Topic

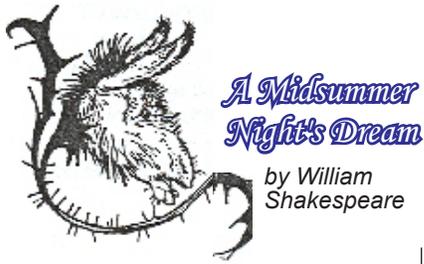
The Dream Theme

Much of the play considers the relationship between reality and dream/ imagination. How does Puck's epilogue use the dream/reality relationship to discuss the experience of the play?

Epilogue:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend;
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck,
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call.
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.

- An epilogue encourages applause. What other elements does this epilogue engage?
- What might the use of both names—*Puck/trickster* and *Robin/helper*—suggest in the epilogue?



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